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ABSTRACT

In rural northeastern South Carolina, a resource room teacher from a Hartsville elementary school and a teacher educator from Coker College supported each other during change processes affecting their respective programs. This voluntary 3-year association of a single college faculty member and a single classroom teacher was characterized by a friendship base, an open-ended "agenda," a true sense of parity in the relationship, and a mutual search for information or solutions to problems. The continuous exchange of information and ideas led to the development of a collaborative consultation model of service in the elementary school, and to a new college major to prepare teachers to work in such a model. Such partnerships have the potential to provide ongoing professional development and support to the special educator, while providing a way for the college professor to conduct "reality checks" of the preservice curriculum. Capitalizing on what rural areas do best, this model focuses on the efficacy of "people" resources as opposed to material or financial resources, and downplays the importance of administrative or institutional involvement. (SV)

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Hand in Hand:
Supporting Change through Practitioner-College Partnerships

Introduction

Change is in the air! Educational programs in the United States have been under intense scrutiny since the early 1980's. Many of the reports have concluded that our system of educating children is not working, that our students are leaving their school experience unprepared to deal with the challenges of an increasingly technological and multicultural world. The criticism and debate has been even more intense in the sub-system of special education, that component of our schools charged with meeting the needs of those students who are least able to "keep up" and "measure up", The job demands of special educators have increased exponentially. Volumes of paperwork are required to document that they have indeed done what they are required to do. Requirements proliferate, and rarely are the teachers themselves provided an opportunity to contribute to finding better ways to do things, nor even asked to comment on the appropriateness of solutions invented by others. Doing more, with more students, with fewer resources, and often without adequate space and time is the order of the day. Since special educators in rural areas are often the only ones in their buildings or districts who serve students with disabilities, they often experience a degree of isolation in their jobs that all but guarantees a short professional career. In a survey of persons who have left special education or teaching entirely, Platt and Johnson (1990) identified the following as reasons teachers leave the special education classroom: too much paperwork, too many students, lack of administrative recognition and support, lack of participation in decision making, and too much responsibility with too few resources. Just when we need to retain teachers with enough experience to be effective reflective thinkers and problem-solvers, we create more barriers to their efforts. Not surprising, they leave, convinced that it is "their fault", that they are not able to handle the job. The literature on stress and burnout (e.g., Platt & Johnson, 1990) often concludes that the solution to these retention problems lies in training teachers to use better organizational skills and other stress-control methods, thus implicitly "blaming the victim" for the burnout phenomenon rather than looking for ways to alleviate the sources of the stress itself.

The situation in teacher preparation programs is equally difficult. The state of the art in special education is rapidly evolving. Methods that showed promise just a few years ago are quickly replaced by newer ones with greater promise of effectiveness. College professors face the task of keeping up with a rapidly expanding and changing knowledge base, with validating that knowledge base, and with preparing their students to be effective in the "real" world of the special educator. They know that teaching pre-service students methods or approaches

that are not feasible or which prove to be ineffective to implement in actual settings is a futile effort. Teacher educators need a way to validate their knowledge base on a continuing basis.

One solution to both these problems is the school/college partnership. Partnerships between schools and universities are rather commonplace. Historically these partnerships have been institutionally bureaucratic in nature and have been dominated by the university partner, focusing on a single issue or project of limited duration (Wangemann, Ingram & Muse, 1989), often fueled by grants with all their accompanying constraints. Reports in the literature typically report only successful efforts, thus making it difficult to determine what the essential characteristics of good partnerships are. In a review of existing reports, Wangemann et al. (1989, p. 62) identified the following elements that seem to be related to successful collaboration:

"(1) clarity of purpose
(2) complementary dissimilarity between the partners
(3) overlapping self-interests
(4) sufficient time to build bridges of communication and trust
(5) clarification and coordination of roles within the partnership
(6) shared ownership
(7) emphasis on action rather than on structure building
(8) adequate resources
(9) leadership from key administrators
(10) institutional commitment to the satisfying of mutual self-interests
(11) on ongoing system of research and evaluation
(12) an understanding of each institution's culture."

The purpose of this paper is to present a model by which teachers in rural schools and faculty members in teacher preparation programs can support each other in the change process facing our schools and teacher education, and to examine the components of that model which contributed to its success. The "hand-in hand" partnership is a voluntary association of a single college faculty member and a single classroom teacher, and is characterized by a friendship base, an open-ended "agenda", a true sense of parity in the relationship, and a mutual search for information or solutions to problems (Friend & Cook, 1992). Such partnerships have the potential to provide ongoing professional development and support to the special educator, as well as to provide a way for the college professor to conduct "reality checks" of the preservice curriculum. Capitalizing on what rural areas do best, the "hand-in-hand" model focuses on the efficacy of "people" resources as opposed to material or financial resources. It supports and facilitates change in our schools and communities by addressing the needs of and providing support to rural special educators and faculty involved in teacher preparation programs which supply teachers for rural schools.

A Story of Change

Our story begins in the summer of 1989 in Hartsville, a rural community located in Darlington County in northeastern South Carolina. West Hartsville Elementary School serves students from K-6, drawing from the west end of the small town of Hartsville and the surrounding farming areas. The special education teacher was serving her students using a typical pull-out resource model. She had been serving these students for a year, although her professional preparation was

in regular early childhood education. She was in the process of taking the special education courses required for certification when the collaboration began.

Coker College, also located in Hartsville, is a small liberal arts college with a strong commitment to service to the public schools in the northeastern region of rural South Carolina. As the story unfolded, Coker College was in the process of establishing a preparation program for special educators. The faculty wanted this new program to reflect the current "best practices" in special education as well as to prepare special educators who would continue to grow and serve students in this region over a period of years. The decision was made to establish a generic special education major, with emphasis on services to students with mild disabilities in non-categorical service models. Additionally, it was felt that new teachers needed a good grounding in skills of collaboration and consultation needed for evolving service models (West, Idol & Cannon , 1989). The challenge was that the implementation of this preparation program was occurring in advance of the establishment of such programs in local schools. College faculty were faced with the lack of appropriate practicum sites for the new model, as well as with few opportunities to validate the content of the new program.

The initial contact was made by the resource teacher. She called the college faculty member to secure some help with resources for a college course she was taking. An extended conversation ensued during which a number of issues of concern to the teacher were raised. It developed that she was in the process of designing an alternative way to serve her fifth and sixth grade resource students during the 1989-90 year since her room was not big enough to seat her large enrollment. As the conversation proceeded, information was shared, resources identified, and new ideas explored. The college partner was excited by the possibility of a demonstration site for collaborative models of service, and the school partner expressed interest in learning more about new strategies and models of service. The two educators had begun a partnership. Echoing the experiences reported by Miller (1990),

> "we were drawn together by our questions. We knew that the questions differed, depending on our particular situations, but we also felt that our questions intersected enough to warrant a collaborative approach to our investigations. ... we had begun a collaboration that has expanded into spaces that none of us could have imagined on that hot summer day." (Miller, p. 19-21)

Several similar phone contacts occurred that summer, always extending far beyond the original need or topic. Informal brainstorming allowed mutual exploration of solutions to problems that were confronting both partners. The college partner provided the school partner with books and periodicals which described collaborative models, and she indicated a willingness to continue these contacts into the school year. The school partner agreed to document and share the outcomes of her implementation experience. Plans were made to meet informally and to review the progress of the experiment in cooperative, collaborative service. The resource teacher later observed:

> From that point on I found someone that could guide and help me. Until that point, there was no one. [She] introduced new methods, suggested resources, new models of Resource [Room teaching]. We collaborated, talked, and shared...Because of our friendship and willingness to share, I believe it made for an excellent environment for the student teacher I had last spring... As a classroom teacher, it is easy to live in those four walls, to limit ourselves and not look beyond the door. I know that I am a better teacher because of the

collaboration between the [college partner] and myself, between the college students and myself, and between the classroom teachers and myself. Having a college professor as a mentor, as a friend, as an encourager has enabled me to help others. It is a vital link for schools and colleges and especially for teacher preparation.

From the college partner's perspective, the benefits were also great. As the friendship developed, validation for components of the college preparation program was obtained. For example, initially it appeared from the literature on inclusion models of programming that it was conceivable that one day resource rooms might be completely replaced by collaborative, consultative models including cooperative teaching in mainstream classrooms. The experience at West Hartsville indicated that, even though the academic needs of the fifth and sixth graders were being well met by programming delivered cooperatively in the regular classroom, these students still appeared to need a "safe haven", to know that there was a place or a time in the school day when they could relax, to receive the emotional support for the great academic efforts they were making. The regular classroom could not provide this, and so a short "decompression" period was added at the close of the day when these students could elect to come to the resource room for "check-in". This example illustrates how valuable partnerships can be. When the resource teacher reported this development to the college partner in a lunch visit, the reaction of the college partner was affirming, particularly since the observation, although unexpected, was completely justifiable, indicated excellent reflective thinking on the part of the school staff, and added to the knowledge base on the feasibility of inclusion programming. A second learning was the development of an efficient record-keeping system by the school partner that allowed her to document activities in the co-teaching portion of her day which addressed objectives on specific students' IEP's. The information gained from the partnership provided "face validity" for the program in the college students' eyes. As the professor incorporated specific stories from the partnership, students developed the confidence that what they were learning was valid and relevant and not just "ivory tower" thinking. The college partner acquired important data that helped further develop the conceptual basis for the college program. From both the school and the college perspective, the partnership activities provided the kind of validation and accommodation that must occur if theory is to translate into practice.

The informal "give-and-take" conversations continued over a three year period (1989-1992). As the resource teacher's case load changed, additional opportunities for joint problem solving arose. The conversations helped the teacher identify new approaches and to modify them to fit the specific demands of that setting. The school partner audited the first offering of the college course on collaborative consultation and provided helpful feedback on the content of that course, feedback which made a subsequent offering of the course more effective. In the spring of 1992, the college and school partners team-taught a six-semester hour course in the characteristics of learners with mild disabilities which the school partner characterized as "the high point of our collaboration... It brought the [theoretical] and the practical together for the preparation of the college students." It also validated the equality in the relationship. in the eyes of the partners as well as the students. All of these experiences helped the college partner refine the content in the new special education major, affirming the applicability of much that was envisioned, but adding a reality base that acknowledged that no one model works everywhere for every student. This awareness reinforced the need to structure a college program that developed the preservice students' reflective problem-solving abilities, and which provided a rich background in methods and approaches, coupled

with an intense exposure to the depth of professional literature and extensive in-classroom practica.

And so, a story of change is told. A resource room teacher in a small town in South Carolina implements a new model of service and acquires new methods of serving her students, using her college partner as a sounding board and resource. A college professor in a small teacher education program refines the pre-service experiences of her students based on the collaborative contacts with the school partner. Change? Yes. Small change? Maybe not. The strength the partners gained from each other has enabled both of them to reach out with confidence to others who are asking the same questions. The college students also were the beneficiaries of this partnership. As they move out into their careers, they take with them ideas and philosophies that have been refined through the partnership's collaborations. They also take with them a positive model of a professional teacher. Instead of seeing classroom teachers denigrated by their college teachers, they saw a classroom teacher who was growing professionally and held in respect by college faculty. Hopefully this awareness will encourage them to be active in the change process and to have confidence in their abilities.

Further evidence of the force for change fostered by the partnership is the following: with the encouragement of the college partner, the school partner has presented workshops and seminars on her experiences, beginning with a poster session at S.C. Council for Exceptional Children State Convention in 1990 and including three full-session presentations at subsequent conferences and conventions; she also conducted several inservice sessions for the Darlington County School District, and an inservice program for regular and special education teachers in neighboring Lee County this past summer as they approached the implementation of a consultative model in their district. The confidence the partnership engendered in the school partner has enabled her to be supportive of others involved in change efforts. In particular, the school partner reports on her first visit with the special educator from Lee County:

> I met with Mrs. Ferguson two days before the presentation. She had many concerns. The main concern: Will the resource model meet these students' needs? Lee County also wanted to implement co-teaching with regular educators two or three periods a day. We discussed her needs and talked about the flexibility of the different models. This would be an experimental year to try things and see if they worked. She had a wonderful attitude with a willingness to try but she still had some reservations about the change. It was at this point I realized that she had not one model but two models to adjust to. She had never used the resource model, much less co-teaching. She taught a self-contained class with all handicapping conditions. This would be a major adjustment for her as well as the entire faculty.

Subsequently, the school partner met with the entire faculty of Bishopville Primary School, and then with teaching teams who would be directly affected. Schedules were discussed and plans made; she later observed:

> It was a morning of awareness and collaboration with a desire to work together to meet the special needs of students in the least restrictive environment. We hope to keep sharing ideas between Bishopville Primary and West Hartsville Elementary throughout the year.

Analysis of the Experience

And so the network grew. Change efforts were supported through the informal mutual exchange of problems, information, ideas and results, over the phone, over coffee and over common meals. These exchanges led to a genuine appreciation for the expertise of both partners as well as a sense of greatly enhanced problem solving from having two heads working on each problem. Beyond that, a close personal friendship developed, born of mutual support and respect. The exchange of thinking led specifically to the development of a collaborative consultation model of service in that elementary school, and to a new college major to prepare teachers to work in such a model. Both partners contributed, both benefited. It was realized how powerful a force for change this partnership idea had become. Both partners were empowered to support change beyond their particular institutions. "Hand in hand", change occurred.

One way of analyzing this effort is to compare the characteristics of this relationship with the criteria Wangemann et al. (1989) identified for effective partnerships to determine which of them is represented and helpful in this type of partnership. The following characteristics were present or emerged during the experience:

Complementary dissimilarity between the partners. Both partners brought unique and complementary resources to the collaboration, but it was the basic sense of respect for the other that allowed each partner to share questions, doubts, and problems without risk to self-esteem, without "losing face." The "complementary dissimilarity" must be supported by mutual respect , as well as an abiding belief in the parity of those resources, for collaboration to work.

Overlapping self-interests. It was clear from the beginning that both partners had something to gain from this endeavor. Equally important was that these self-interests were related to the larger goal of serving students with disabilities in the public school. It was this common concern, and not just personal self-interest, that fueled the partnership.

Sufficient time to build bridges of communication and trust. Throughout the three year period, there was never a sense of time pressure; the relationship was allowed to evolve in its own time. This relaxed time frame assured that the collaboration did not increase stress on either partner. This natural development prevented a sense that either partner was being exploited by the other and led to a basic sense of trust and effective communication. Both trust and accurate communication are essential for any collaboration.

Shared ownership. There was definitely a sense of shared ownership. Both partners raised issues to be solved, and both sought the advice of the other. It would appear critical that any partnership have a sense of shared ownership to function. Even more importantly, the shared ownership must exist in practice and not just in words.

Emphasis on action rather than on structure building. The partnership was born of a need, and it was characterized throughout by its orientation toward "doing"; no time was diverted to institutional maintenance. It is likely that it was the sense of immediacy of effect that sustained it over the three years. So often teachers have to endure hours of meaningless meetings and "inservices", counting themselves lucky to emerge with a single new idea to use in their programs. This was avoided because both partners were concerned with "getting the job done."

Adequate resources. One of the real advantages of the "hand-in hand" model is that it uses "people power" rather than scarce material resources and funds. As a problem-solving model, it uses human inventiveness and mutual support to maximize the efforts of the partners. In the face of scarce resources, people power may be our only reliable resource. The one resource that was needed was time, and admittedly, there rarely was enough of that. However, the friendship nature of the partnership made it seem less onerous to use personal time for the collaborations.

An understanding of each institution's culture. While it did not begin as a goal of the partnership, one of the outcomes was an enhanced appreciation of the culture in which the other operated. This was beneficial to the communication process and led to better problem-solving as the partnership evolved.

On the other hand, some of the criteria cited by Wangemann et al. (1989) were not found to be present, and in fact might have impeded or destroyed the partnership had they been cultivated:

Clarity of purpose. When the partnership began, there was no sense of a "project" being launched, no formal goals and objectives. In fact, it is likely that a formalization of goals and objectives would have created a barrier to further development. It grew as a friendship grows; as personal benefit was perceived, effort was expended. In this case, it was the natural evolution of the relationship rather than clearly defined purposes that proved to be the strength of the partnership.

Clarification and coordination of roles within the partnership. The structure of the partnership was informal and the number of participants small, so it was never necessary to move past the organizational structure of equal partners. This contributed greatly to trust and effectiveness. Neither party was designated nor perceived as having more responsibility, power, or expertise. As noted by Pugach and Johnson (1990), it is the hierarchical nature of most consultation models that contributes to teacher resistance to participation and change. It is essential that the partners be perceived as equals and that the questioning and reflection required for change occur in a safe, sheltered environment. Differences in power, real or perceived, would prohibit the creation of such an environment.

Leadership from key administrators. In this model, administrators are largely irrelevant. The model works at the "street bureaucrat" level (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977) where real people are. It provides support to the partners (or "street level bureaucrats") as they seek ways to accommodate the demands placed on them and to confront the realities of limited resources. The "hand-in-hand" model allows peers to support one another's growth and change, even in the absence of administrative support.

Institutional commitment to the satisfying of mutual self-interests. No institutional commitment is required for "hand-in-hand" partnerships to operate. Certainly, the schools and colleges can be supportive of these connections, but a mutually satisfying partnership can be created without any official sanction. In some situations, the absence of administrative mandate might be a requirement for the partnership to function effectively, particularly if the administrative relationship has been autocratic in nature in the past.

An ongoing system of research and evaluation. The best indication that a partnership is effective is the desire of the partners to continue in it. This was the case in this relationship. The partners continued to collaborate because at some level each perceived the partnership to be of value and worth the effort expended.

This validation, while it lacks statistical power, is in the final analysis the only one that matters. Formal evaluation would have used valuable time and resources, and would likely have solidified the model into "rigor-mortis".

The conclusion?? As indicated above, some of the criteria that the institutional mindset dictates as important to the success of a cooperative endeavor appear to be irrelevant at the level at which most educators operate. When we try to utilize the institutional structures to accomplish change, we usually fail because of the difficulty in navigating and harnessing the institutional giant (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). In the long run, change happens because individual people find a better way to do something and then share that idea with a friend (Smylie, 1988). If it works, that person passes it on. The "hand-in-hand" model is a vehicle for doing that. No grants or bylaws or contracts are required; no hierarchical relationships nor accountability requirements intrude. All that is needed is the willingness to share ourselves. How can this be promoted?? If each of us could become more open to opportunities to share as equals with others, if we can set aside the need for public acclaim, if we can allow time for relationships to develop, to get to know and trust each other, and if we can find ways for college faculty and school teachers to meet one another as equals and friends, change <u>can</u> occur.

The Future

West Hartsville Elementary School has now added consultation as a viable level on the continuum of services. The school partner continues to make adaptations in the model to meet changing needs. She has developed a "hand-in-hand" partnership with regular educators in her building as well as with a special educator from a neighboring county. The school partner and her regular education partners continue to collaborate and have given several joint presentations about their work together in their district and across the state. The school partner has also developed a "hand-in-hand" partnership with the speech therapist in her building. All these partnerships are characterized by the same sense of parity and reciprocity that exists in the original partnership. All are leading these professionals into new and exciting areas of investigation and service. With the experience gained in the partnership, the college partner was instrumental in developing and implementing an innovative major in special education based on the principle of collaboration. The partners collaborated on developing and teaching a course on the characteristics of learners with mild disabilities from a cross-categorical perspective, and continue to work together on the development of collaborative models.

In the fall of 1992, another such a partnership was begun with a teacher at the Colton-Pierrepont Central School in northern New York. The special educator in this small rural school was already implementing collaborative services on a part-time basis and had expanded the program to include two other special educators. The college partner, now in a new position on the faculty of Potsdam College, learned of these efforts, and early discussions resulted in interest in establishing a "hand-in hand" partnership between the Potsdam College faculty member and the Colton-Pierrepont teacher. It is envisioned that this partnership too will: (a) provide needed mutual support to the partners in their work for school change, and (b) provide information needed as the college partner learns about the organizational structure of the public schools in New York state and as Potsdam College initiates its new graduate program in special education. The partners are working together to establish a new local chapter of the Council for Exceptional Children in the North Country region of New York, to provide an environment where college and school

personnel can meet and discuss common concerns and hopefully form additional "hand-in-hand" partnerships.

Even more important than these accomplishments are the deep friendships that have evolved from these partnerships. All involved have been empowered by these supportive conversations to be effective advocates for and implementers of change. These partnerships are ongoing and have provided and will continue to provide support for college and school personnel involved in change efforts. Through their conversations, the partners become stronger in their advocate roles, the support they receive proving invaluable in enabling them to persist in articulating needed changes within their individual systems. The partnership becomes supportive, not coercive, because the partners have developed a friendship and trust, a commitment to making the other as good as each can become. It is expected that the benefits described in this paper can be achieved in any situation in which school practitioners and college faculty can arrange to talk on a regular basis, face to face or via electronic technology. "Hand-in-hand" partnerships can also develop between teachers within a school or in different schools. The only essential requirement is the desire of both partners to share with each other what they know and what they learn.

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